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Rethinking Hong Kong's Theological Education: An Argument for Lived Theology

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Abstract

Public opinion in Hong Kong has been moving toward a narrative that diminishes the value of the humanities both within its own society and in the broader context of mainland China. This, of course, influences how theology is understood in Hong Kong. Theological education in Hong Kong often uses Western Enlightenment paradigms, theories, and materials, but what if Hong Kongers were to ground their understanding of contextual theology in their own experiences? What does it mean to value local theological knowledge in Hong Kong? The practices of Hong Kong's laity could be important to local theologians' theorization of Hong Kong theology.

What do Christian lay people in Hong Kong consider theology to be? In what ways does theology grow out of their lives? Questions like these must be understood and analyzed to enable Hong Kong theology to develop based on the lived theologies of its people, reflecting theological lessons learned from post-Handover socio-politics.

First, I argue for the public value of theological education in Hong Kong. Second, in a culture where theological education is largely seen as vocational training for ministers, I explore why Hong Kong lay Christians wish to study theology, and I suggest the necessity of lifting up local, lay knowledge. Finally, I propose rethinking theological education in a comprehensive, liberal arts style in order to stimulate the laity's critical thinking about their faith. Working out one's theology in community with others is crucial, because it is in communities that the emotional and affective dimensions of religion have their place and where theologies are cross-checked with lived experience.

Introduction

Hong Kong is a fast-paced city in which, as the Hong Kong saying goes, people must "win at the starting line" (贏在起跑綫), which means that they see life as a competitive sport where everyone strives to make the right move at the very beginning, so they do not get left behind and eventually lose. With this mentality, Hong Kongers tend to act first, spending little time reflecting on why or whether they should take certain actions; instead, they simply follow the path that seems most esteemed. For example, when I first started my undergraduate studies, I

had not reflected on the meaning of university education. In fact, I did not even know there was an alternative to university education, since everyone else I knew was pursuing undergraduate studies, and my secondary school had a university counselor whose very role was to help us with university applications, assuming we all wanted to pursue this route. Britain-based Hong Kongers Nathan Law and Evan Fowler, in their book titled Freedom: How We Lose It and How We Fight Back, described Law's education experience: "Hong Kong is a hectic city, with a demanding and highly structured school system. Despite attempts at reform, much of the learning continues to be by rote. Chinese families prize education, not so much for its own sake as for the status it bestows" (70). In line with Law's experiences, Canadian academics Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmerman establish that universities are not simply training grounds to provide relevant skills for a promising career after graduation:

> This is not the heart of the university. If it were, technical schools could easily replace universities. Technical schools are by nature multiversities that supply job skills. The only unifying factor of technically oriented institutions is material advancement. The liberal arts university, however, stands apart because it assumes and operates under an overall purpose that allows the student to integrate acquired skills toward a universally acknowledged goal of character formation and of growth into a greater understanding of what it means to be human. (191)

Arts and humanities education is intrinsically valuable and, thus, unlike the sciences, does not have to apply its research to create a product that can be valued in dollars and cents. Academic and art critic Po-shan Leung, however, shows that the government's political arm has grouped culture, art, and conservation into a creativity narrative, relating it to economic structural changes, land development, human resources, education, and youth policy, rather than allowing culture to have its own intrinsic value (145-73). This has led to criticisms about how the words "culture" and "heritage" have become empty signifiers.

Equally, I argue that the current theological education does not suffice in post-colonial Hong Kong, especially in reflecting on colonial traumas related to Christianity and how to indigenize Christianity in the context of Hong Kong. In discussing theological education, I am focusing on the normative study of Christianity, though some of the discussion may touch on religious studies, that is, on the scholarly investigation of religion, usually from a social-scientific approach. Hong Kong theological education requires more profound reflection. Currently, church Sunday school usually serves the purpose of providing catechism classes and leading people to baptism. After

baptism, theological education, usually within church contexts, depends on the individual pastors' interests and abilities in particular biblical scriptures, as well as individual churches' resources; there is not usually a coherent curriculum that goes beyond Bible study. In post-colonial Hong Kong, we ought to reimagine how Hong Kong theological education looks in university, seminary, and church settings. There is a need to contextualize Christianity for Hong Kongers, making theology more relevant to locals rather than being some ahistorical, universal knowledge that is distant and alienating to local believers. This would give Hong Kong Christians better knowledge of God and of themselves as Christians, and of how this identity should lead them to act.

This topic has been discussed by other Hong Kong academics. For example, Pan-chiu Lai also discussed how teaching Christian theology in Chinese poses linguistic, psychological, and colonial barriers. Additionally, Lai explores how an indigenized Chinese theology can simultaneously be impactful to a global Christianity, based on his experiences in the Divinity School of Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (91-104). I do not intend to present this as a novel idea – the focus is on rethinking, as I think a renewed focus on this issue may be helpful for future conversations.

Theological education in Hong Kong often uses Western Enlightenment paradigms, theories, and materials, demonstrating how Hong Kong's understanding of theology is heavily influenced by others, be it America, Britain, or Germany. In local Christian communities, discussion of what to do in a situation often leads to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stanley Hauerwas, or other white male theologians from the West have written. This may mislead Hong Kong Christians to think that theologizing is only done by professionals from the West. Hong Kong seminarian Tin Tsz-feng also finds that, when talking about theology, many may think of it as passive doctrinal studies, only conducted by Christian studies scholars or theologians in a library (xix-xxiv). But what if Hong Kongers begin to ground their understanding of contextual theology in themselves? What does it mean to value local theological knowledge in Hong Kong? What if the practices of Hong Kong's laity are important to local theologians' theorization of Hong Kong theology?

This article argues that Hong Kong Christians' theologies must be understood, analyzed, and valued within Christian communities. This will enable the development of a Hong Kong theology based on lived theologies of the laity, reflecting theological lessons learned from post-Handover Hong Kong socio-politics.

Public Value of Theological Education in Hong Kong Universities

In providing supporting evidence from different contexts, I demonstrate that global trends are devaluing knowledge and culture for their own sake. For example, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) issued a memorandum on 8

June 2015, titled "About the Adjustment of Public Universities and Other Organizations" (關於國立大學法人等組織及業務的整體調整), which led to a major societal impact in Japan about MEXT wanting to abolish arts and humanities studies, with the media reporting it in such a way as to limit critique of the government (1-15). This discussion in Japan is representative of other geographic areas, as it too implies that the knowledge of arts and humanities does not create value or meaning. While "it invariably proves more difficult to characterize the nature of teaching and research in the humanities, and thus to explain their value, than it does to give such an account of the scientific, medical, and technological discipline" (Collini 47-63), I find these to be misguided attempts to use the lens of understanding science subjects to understand arts and humanities.

Theological education needs to be Hong Kong-specific. There is increasing demand for education to be practically applied and made concrete, rethinking who the current system is set up to benefit and how to structurally rethink the system to be available and accessible to those who find the environment hostile. Ways of knowing can be pluralistic, and universities need to invest in exploring how to incorporate indigenous, ancient ways of knowing, which are important for community development and cultural preservation, not just for technological advancements. This also impacts theological education in Hong Kong universities specifically, as they are time- and context-specific. Theological education in Hong Kong public settings, in comparison to seminary settings, focuses more on academic research and training academics in theological studies.

I will now use an example from my teaching experience to illustrate how theological studies is being sidelined. The deliberate replacement of theology with what is considered advanced or contemporary – that is, the sciences – directly impacts academic research and teaching. Hong Kong sociologist Ambrose Yeo-chi King finds that Hong Kong's paradigm of university education stems from the modern, research-based university, a model born in nineteenth-century Germany, under the reformation led by Wilhelm von Humboldt, replacing the Medieval European university's core in researching and teaching theology (xi-xxii). For example, I am currently teaching in the Academy of Chinese, History, Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, and our undergraduate degree is called the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics. Despite "religion" being the first word, many of our students resent having to take religious studies courses, arguing that they really only want to learn philosophy and that religious studies courses are just an unfortunate but necessary evil. King also observes this problem, where science is seen as the basis of knowledge, and the traditional meaning and value of ethics and aesthetics have been marginalized (xi-xxii). Even as the students see the value of

philosophy through the perceived scientific-ness of analytic philosophy or logic, they cannot comprehend the purpose of religious studies.

I now illustrate how the secular world has internalized faith structures, too. The social world, however, is based on a faith structure. Tim Hutchings, Céline Benoit, and Rachel Shillitoe find that religion is a signifier for other secular concepts that make sense of oneself and of the world, such as spirituality or worldview, and that "religious and non-religious worldviews have a lot in common, tackling the same 'existential questions' and 'questions of identity, belonging, commitment, behaviour and practice'" (8-28). Canadian-American philosopher James K. A. Smith illustrates that going to a shopping mall can be ritualistic, and that when trying to understand how humans perceive and structure the world, it is important to have an idea of how religion works in these structures (18-21). Smith points out that education, including higher education, is not primarily about the absorption of ideas and information but about the formation of hearts and desires. He stresses that thinking about education as only a matter of disseminating information – because it assumes human beings are primarily thinking things or believing animals – gives a stunted, flattened picture of the rich complexity of being human (Smith 18-21). As such, in theological education in Hong Kong universities, the aim is not only to provide information on Christianity but also to help students to see the underlying faith and religious aspects that influence society and relationships, and to critically analyze these influences.

I argue that incarnational humanism is a suitable lens to look at university education. Additionally, Klassen and Zimmermann use the idea of incarnational humanism in understanding Christianity in university education settings:

> Your goal as a Christian student, regardless of whether you have chosen to attend a Christian or a secular university, should be based on the fact that Christians are supposed to be the paradigm for a new humanity founded by Christ and inaugurated by his resurrection from the dead, a decisive event signaling the reconciliation of humanity to God and anticipating the full redemption of God's creation. (17)

Therefore, in understanding university education through the lens of incarnational humanism, it is through university education that students can understand humanity and what it means to be human. Humanistic inquiry produces knowledge that is situated in the context of the thinker, and that is also how theology is produced, by understanding who God is through His interactions with us in our situatedness. "[T]he study of religion stands out because it treats 'religion' not as a given domain of human experiences but as an analytic category through which we examine the world around us" (LoRusso)—

and that leads to understanding how societies, made up of humans, function as communities with various theological frameworks.

Theological Education in Hong Kong Seminaries

In comparison to university settings, theological education in seminaries is mainly for pastoral training, with some focus on teaching Hong Kong lay Christians "what to think," and the teachings are understood by lay Christians as a very intensive version of Sunday school in churches.

In a culture where theological education is largely seen as vocational training for ministers and pastors, I explore why Hong Kong lay Christians wish to study theology, and I suggest the necessity of lifting up local, lay knowledge. This also aligns with the increasing localism and emerging local identity in Hong Kong's wider context. Netizens see Christianity as not adapting to societal changes, so there is no need to study theology (Lin). But are theological studies in the Hong Kong seminary context a lost cause? I examine narratives by Hong Kong's laity in church magazines and social media comments to assess whether pragmatism and Eurocentrism in Hong Kong theological education are problems.

Problem: Seeing Theological Education from a Conservative and Pragmatic Lens

I am interested in much more than what published theologians think. As a sociologist of religion, I am interested in what average Hong Kong Christians think and how they act, because this is most representative of actual Hong Kong Christian communities rather than just abstract inferences of what they may or should believe (A. G. Chu, "Stanley Hauerwas" 262-76). I will continue in this line of analysis, analyzing congregants' and social media users' formal and informal writings.

In citing different ways Hong Kong lay Christians talk about themselves and theological education, I aim to demonstrate problems I observe in Hong Kong theological education. In an Evangelical Free Church of China – Kong Fok Church publication, Way of Blessing, one congregant, Wendy Chu, explained her understanding of theological education in local seminaries. She questions, "if one does not have a deep understanding of the Bible, how can one properly spread the gospel?" (143-148). W. Chu demonstrates her theology of seeing seminary education as a matter of practicality, enhancing herself for the necessities of spreading the gospel rather than for a more personal growth of getting to know God or how to be a faithful Christian. But is this necessarily the intent of seminary education? Is a "selfish"

approach fostered by personal growth unsuitable for studying theology? Local Christian newspaper Hong Kong Christian Times interviewed several part-time seminary students pseudonymously, and one of them, Carrie (alias), also sees that "pastors are leaving the church regularly, so I think that if, one day, there is nobody to take up pastoral work, I need to equip myself for that situation" (Lin). Britain-based Hong Kong philosopher Andrew Ka-pok Tam finds that if he is not able to situate his research in the framework of how it can "help spread the Gospel and enhance church growth," then seminary professors, who are also his potential recruiters, will stop listening to him, because they only want to know what tools are available to spread the gospel. Nonetheless, the Christian Bible explicitly says that "[t]he fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (NASB, Prov. 9.10). Whether studying theology for spreading the gospel or for personal growth, if we are able to get to know who God is in the context of who we are, that can help believers better understand their faiths and worldviews, from which they can reflect on faith and praxis.

In addition to pragmatism, another issue is with conservatism in the understanding of theological education, which I demonstrate by citing Hong Kong lay Christians and analyzing their representations. Of course, seminary courses necessarily involve biblical studies, which forms a solid part of seminary training. The problem is not with the courses offered in seminaries but, rather, with how the laity understands these courses. W. Chu presents her "desire to systematically study the Bible, fully accept biblical teachings, and deeply learn the Word of God" (143-148). Another part-time seminary student interviewed by Christian Times, Katherine (alias), said she applied for part-time study at a local seminary because she took some biblical courses outside of her church, and she wanted to have more sturdy theological training (Lin). The way W. Chu and Katherine present why they want to study theology is problematic. It shows that W. Chu, Katherine, and by extension, other Christians in Hong Kong think "studying theology" is equivalent to reading and learning the Bible alone. This understanding misses the mark. Theology is a comprehensive term for knowledge of God, which in Christian seminary contexts usually entails learning about, among other things, biblical studies, systematic and doctrinal theology, church history, practical theology, and ministry practicum. Seeing "studying theology" as simply a lengthy Bible study leaves a big gap in the understanding of what seminary teaching is. It is important in any theological education to reassess our values and how our praxis reflects what we think about our faith.

I now illustrate another example of Hong Kong lay Christians' views. With W. Chu and Katherine's narrative, it is no wonder YouTube user Kitman Wu complains about Hong Kong philosopher of theology

Andrew Wai-luen Kwok in his book talk for Love, Desire, and Ethics: A Theology of Sex for the Chinese Church at Yau Oi Church. Wu cautioned Kwok in his exegesis when quoting the Bible, warning against misconstruing the Bible to support his stance. Wu finds that Kwok's teachings are mostly analytical and philosophical, based on a small number of scholars, and rarely from a biblical perspective. Wu also finds that Kwok only cites his favorite philosophers or what he thinks rather than what the Bible says. Wu attacks Kwok by saying that, when he is confronted with the Church's usual teachings that differ from his, Kwok would argue that if the Church's teaching stands, then his teaching also stands. Wu finds that to be problematic as that does not solve why the Church or Kwok's stance would work. Wu uses an example of traffic lights: if a father told his son not to cross during a red light, but there is another pedestrian who crosses, his son may be able to say that, if that pedestrian crossed, then there is no right or wrong, and that blurs the meaning of why we need traffic lights in the first place. Wu concludes by saying we should want to know what God thinks, not what humans think ("Andrew Wai-luen Kwok").

I now analyze Wu's viewpoint of what the Bible is and how people read the Bible. It is problematic because it holds a very narrow understanding of what theology and biblical exegesis mean, but it is also important to analyze because Wu's view represents many Protestant Christian congregants in Hong Kong. When Wu accused Kwok of only citing his favorite philosophers, those among whom Kwok cited include the late pope John Paul II, Anglican vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields Samuel Wells, and Reverend Russell Rook, who previously served in the Salvation Army. While there is nothing wrong with citing philosophy in understanding theology, especially since Christianity did heavily engage in conversations with Greek philosophy in its beginnings, it is also a bit strange to call the Pope, an Anglican vicar, and a Reverend "philosophers", rather than pastors, theologians, or, even, people of faith. Wu wants to know what God thinks, but that assumes there is an acontextual, ahistorical way of knowing what God thinks alone, separate from human interpretation. That is simply impossible, as nobody can understand or interpret outside their own bodies. Humans are not brains on sticks, but, rather, our understanding and application of anything, including the Bible, must necessarily be grounded in our bodily contexts.

The problems of Hong Kong lay Christians and theological education have been identified by forerunners in Hong Kong theological education. Hong Kong's Christian conservatism, especially that of Evangelical Christians, limits how believers define what learning theology means, that is, strictly exegeting the Bible from an ahistoric, acontextual perspective, without engaging with other believers who have been faithfully engaging with biblical exegesis diachronically throughout the centuries. Citing those theologians is deemed "quoting

your favorite philosophers." This is not because theologians and educators in Hong Kong are unaware of this problem, but, rather, a grounded perspective of learning theology has not been adopted by many lay Christians. The late Alliance Bible Seminary president James M. Cheung maintains that studying theology in a seminary context is not just reading, exegeting, and teaching the Bible, because if seminaries only train people to exegete and preach, then when these pastors enter the church context, they would only bring a "dead orthodoxy" (2-6). For Cheung, knowledge and way of life should not be segregated.

Academic focus on rethinking theological education has not translated to church settings. Grounding theological understanding has been a priority in Hong Kong seminaries and divinity schools, as they have been conducting social scientific research on Hong Kong Christian communities. Among those are the Alliance Bible Seminary's Quantitative Research Team, Asian Academy of Practical Theology, Bethel Bible Seminary, Chung Chi Divinity School, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong Campus Crusade for Christ's Innovation and Research Department, Hong Kong Christian Council, and Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement. However, this is largely academic interest with little discussion in church congregations, who are still mostly focused on Bible study-style classes, or what seems to be so.

Separation of faith and reason seems to be an issue for Hong Kong lay Christians. A reason why academic research is not able to interact with lay Christians is that Hong Kong Christian communities tend to see Christian faith as something entirely spiritual or emotional, so even a thread of rationality or scholarism is challenging God's authority. Tin observes that some Hong Kong Christians have the presupposition that knowledge and humility, faith and thinking are mutually exclusive and that theological reflection has nothing to do with spirituality (6-11). This is a misunderstanding of who God is and what piety is about, leading to Hong Kong Christian communities' conservatism and their distance from and misunderstanding of theological education. The issue is not that local theologians should teach differently but, rather, that believers have to expand their perspective in their understanding of what being a Christian means. Theological education is important in this aspect, as it provides a framework of understanding and vocabulary for articulating their theologies.

Lay Christians in Hong Kong can use existing practical theology frameworks in rethinking what theological education can mean in local contexts. The issues I pointed out, citing W. Chu, Wu, and others, are not meant to antagonize them but, rather, to reveal how Hong Kong Christian communities understand theological education and how I, as an insider researcher, would respond to and interact with those lived theologies. The purpose of citing them is mainly to provide a narrative of their thinking and lived theology and reflect on such from a critical

lens, as British practical theologians John Swinton and Harriet Mowat propose: (1) identifying a practice or situation that requires reflection and critical challenge (Current Praxis), (2) applying qualitative research methods by asking new questions (Cultural/Contextual), (3) critically reflecting on the practices of the Church in light of scripture and tradition (Theological), (4) revising forms of faithful practice (Formulating Revised Practice), then circling back to (1) and continuing this journey of being faithful yet critical (3-27). David Doong, General Secretary of Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism Movement (CCCOWE), also proposes a practical theology framework of the following: (1) descriptive task, (2) interpretive task, (3) normative task, and (4) pragmatic task (Tin 210-213). This is why lived theology is important—lay Christians' actions, thoughtful or otherwise, are all real Hong Kong theology (Chu and Perry 422-34). By reflecting on W. Chu, Wu, and by extension, Hong Kong Christian communities' current practice, I, as an insider researcher, am applying qualitative research methods in asking new questions, critically reflecting on current practices in light of scripture and tradition, and hopefully providing suitable inputs to allow for revised forms of faithful practices. Because "the experience of the faithful can be a guide and authority for doctrine and practice" (Perry and Leidenhag 2), I wish to take seriously the theologies of lay Christians in Hong Kong and engage in dialogue with them, understanding where their theologies come from, identifying what I find problematic, and putting them in conversation with one another.

Reflecting on Theological Education in Hong Kong: Lived Theology of Lay Christians as a Key

I argue for rethinking theological education for the laity, both in university and seminary settings, in a comprehensive, liberal arts style intended to stimulate the laity's ability to think critically about their faith. Currently, I find the use of the lens of science subjects prevalent in understanding arts and humanities. The arts and humanities have their own intrinsic value, which does not come from the products the knowledge creates, but, rather, the knowledge itself is of value.

The purpose of university education is to create a society of critical and reflective citizens, not a vocational training institute that creates workers for specific fields—there are other places for that. Hong Kong philosopher Benedict Chan and Hong Kong academic Victor Chan find:

> Participation in a modern society requires more than simply professional education provided by a major field of study. It is more important to nurture every student to master critical thinking skills, to explore ethical challenges in the surrounding

> community, and to acquire board-based [sic] knowledge foundation in humanities, society, and nature. (1-10)

Klassen and Zimmermann add,

> humanistic learning, is the first ingredient for a better society. […] Much more than merely a cognitive lens through which we view the world, a worldview is deeply rooted in our tradition, culture, time, and history. Christian and secular thinkers quite agree that "interpretation is not only pervasive but unavoidable" and that "without interpretation we human beings could not live in this world of ours, given how we experience it. We are consigned to be, or honoured with being, interpreting creatures". (14-17)

Klassen and Zimmermann's argument is in line with mine, as they do not assume that tradition and value-free materialistic pragmatism was brought to a common understanding in the meaning of university brought forth by the Enlightenment.

Therefore, university education should be a place to experiment with different ideas. Law and Fowler recount Law's experience during his undergraduate studies:

> At university there are new people to meet, from different backgrounds and with different perspectives. We are introduced to new ideas, learn to question what we know and thought. We find a space where we can confront and deconstruct questions that we have long struggled to answer, and ask new questions too. University is a significant step in our mental and social development, not so much from what is taught in the classroom, but in the new freedoms we enjoy as we transition to adulthood. […] These few teachers gave me the confidence to address and think about questions that had long been on my mind. These questions often began from a deeply emotive place, but as I learnt to explore and contextualize them, I began to understand why I felt the way I did. (70)

In line with Law's experience, I argue that the university serves the purpose of advancement of humankind diachronically, rather than simply serving the purpose of the government of the country where the university is located. Culture and tradition, a basis of how people in society interact, is not self-interpreting, because much of such knowledge is implicit. An inquiry in the humanities begins with attempts to interpret representations and interpret uses of representations in action and practice, beliefs and attitudes, discourse and communication, and identities and traditions (Bate vi-vii).

Humanities as an academic discipline is where "humans seek understanding of human self-understandings and self-expressions, and of the ways in which people thereby construct and experience the world they live in" (Drees 7).

Theology derives from communal experiences. While accounts of religion historically focus on cerebral phenomena, such as concepts, beliefs, and doctrines, "many religious educators around the world have come to base their understanding of religious education on anthropological views" (Schweitzer). If we think about it, where did concepts, beliefs, and doctrines come from? The Council of Chalcedon and the Council of Nicea, responsible for developing important creeds in Christian tradition, were in response to divergent beliefs at the time, a prime example of basing one's understanding of theology from their communities: "Aspects of religion cannot be conceived of independently of the body, and indeed the bodily aspects of religion, such as ritual practices, have their own cognitive import" (Tanton 1-10). Working out one's theology in community with others is crucial, as it is in communities that the emotional and affective dimensions of religion are accounted for and theologies are cross-checked with lived experience.

Theological education needs to be normalized and demystified among lay Christians in Hong Kong. Currently, Sunday schools in Hong Kong churches tend to teach whatever their pastors happen to know rather than a full curriculum of what congregants need to know to solidify their faith, which is, while unfortunate, understandable due to staffing shortages in church contexts. Theological education in Hong Kong seminary or divinity school settings is largely seen as being for those who are called to pastoral positions, even though many seminaries have non-credit-bearing courses. Those who attend often see themselves as intellectually superior and able to challenge their pastors' theology. For example, W. Chu recounts,

> After 12 years as a believer, 14 years ago, Pastor Chan helped me start studying a part-time evening certificate course at the China Graduate School of Theology. […] On this day, not only is it a big day for me to receive my 5th graduation certificate from the China Graduate School of Theology, but I am also grateful that it is my birthday. Looking back 14 years ago, when I shared this idea to study theology with a fellow Christian, we eventually enrolled in the China Graduate School of Theology together. In January 2008, we embarked on a journey of further theological study, taking all the certificate courses offered for extended study. During the period, I obtained four completion certificates, including: General Theology Certificate, Old Testament Certificate, New Testament Certificate, and Theology and History Certificate. I realized my knowledge was insufficient

> after learning, so five years ago, I further studied the "Believer's Spiritual Care Course". (143-148)

It is strange that W. Chu quantifies certificates this way, as most seminary professors have a Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and would perhaps only have two to three certificates. Is W. Chu implying she is better than seminary professors because she has more certificates than them? While I understand there is some need for gatekeeping, the current hurdle for studying theology is unusual, as congregants need pastoral support to study theology in seminaries, which, therefore, reinforces this idea that they are the chosen ones and thus superior to other laity. Normalizing theological education in Hong Kong is perhaps one way to start.

Being aware of colonial influences makes a good starting point in understanding contextualized theologies. The dissonance of theological education and the everyday practice of being Christian stems from how Christianity has entered Hong Kong, that is, alongside imperialism and colonialism. For example, Charles Gutzlaff, a Bible translator and Lutheran missionary, was an interpreter for Jardine, Matheson & Company on board their opium ships and came to Hong Kong as the first assistant Chinese Secretary of the colonial government. Gutzlaff formed the Chinese Evangelization Society that sent Hudson Taylor, a renowned British missionary and the founder of China Inland Mission, now OMF International, to China (Tong). Politics, business, and Christianity are all monopolized by straight white men. This reinforces the idea that theological education is something that came from the West, created by and for Westerners. As British academic Kehinde Andrews points out,

> Western reason is based on White supremacy, the idea that those at the top of the racial hierarchy have the monopoly on knowledge. Freeing ourselves from the very nature of this intellectual framework is essential. [...] The Enlightenment was a product of the first stage of Western imperialism, with slavery and colonialism clearing the ground for its intellectual project. It then provided the intellectual bridge to the new age of empire, which maintains colonial logic but has clothed itself in the legitimacy of democracy, human rights and universal values. It is essential that we unlearn the distorted view of history that we have been conditioned into. (18-24)

This mindset needs to be in the forefront of doing theological research and praxis in Hong Kong too.

I find that Hong Kong Christians, and perhaps Christians in other contexts as well, need more effort to understand a Western creation of theology in order to meaningfully incorporate it in the local context.

While writing a book review of Scottish-Canadian-Zimbabwean theologian Ross Hastings' The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Exploring Its Theological Significance and Ongoing Relevance, I suddenly realized why I found my Master of Divinity studies at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, more difficult than my white male classmates did. While I worked as Hastings' research assistant for three years and had been taught by him before that, I just assumed I was less intelligent than my white male classmates, which is why it took so much effort for me to achieve the same level as they did so effortlessly. But as I reviewed Hastings' book during my doctoral studies, having some distance from my time at Regent, I realized that "[t]heological debates in the West are often presented in abstract forms, assuming a certain universality" (A. G. Chu 96-100). White voices in theology are presented as an all-encompassing voice, at the expense of engaging with other voices, and what is learned in a Western context is expected to be applicable in the Majority world context, yet, for some reason, not the other way around. American academic April Baker-Bell proposed that white men are familiar with so-called standard English because the standard was set by and for them. Along the same trajectory, contemporary theological education is firmly rooted in the Western Enlightenment, deciding the underlying presupposition of what is worthy of learning and what systems should be implemented. Hong Kong did not go through the Enlightenment but is hugely affected by its results, making certain Enlightenment concepts, which are quite obvious to those from the West, difficult to grasp. I found my courses at Regent College difficult to grasp not because of my own capabilities, though that may also be the case, but more importantly, because the narratives at Regent assume an Anglophone society with similar white experiences; my studying in a class for white male Canadians was an anomaly, and I was not the target audience. That is why, as a Hong Kong-born and raised, ethnically Chinese woman, I need to put in much more effort to understand the assumptions in the theories taught. As British theologian Eve Parker identifies,

> British imperialism sought to colonize bodies and minds. Education was often used as a means of instilling British values, virtues, and notions of morality and decency throughout the Empire. The God of white Christianity was at the centre of such an education—often used in order to divinely justify the condemnation of the lived religiosities and practices of the colonized communities. (ch. 5)

This is not to say Hong Kong Christians should throw out theologies from the West entirely but, rather, be conscious of how their on-the-ground practices and experiences can inform them of their theologies too.

I am not arguing that all theologies rooted in the West have no intrinsic value. In fact, learning anything has to start somewhere, and a Western knowledge framework-based systematic theology is a good starting point, but that does not mean it can be taken up uncritically. Learners need to be given the tools to understand how such a theology does, or does not, work in the Hong Kong context and why. For example, Minzu University of China's Religious Studies Centre Director You Bin, in understanding systematic theology in Chinese culture, proposes that Christian studies need to be self-reflexive, renewing our understanding of the completeness of theology, including: 1) what to believe, 2) what to pray for, 3) how to live, and 4) how to celebrate. You proposes that China's Christian thought system needs to align epistemology with praxis. Hong Kong theologian Lap-yan Kung also reflects on the direction of theological education in Hong Kong, that is 1) who is asking the questions of where God is, because the questioner should direct what is needed in theological education in Hong Kong; 2) theological education needs to develop a community that can hold historical tragedies; and 3) theological education spreads actions that bring hope from God, developing an attitude of waiting. Kung incorporated his experiences in Hong Kong into his understanding of Hong Kong's theological education. I find You's and Kung's attempts to contextualize ways of knowing – grounded in localized actions to make sense of what theology is – to be valuable ventures that Hong Kong Christians should also attempt.

As such, thinking of theological education as a "systematic" way of understanding the Bible has certain presuppositions: that is, certain ways of knowing are above and beyond daily Christianity, and perhaps can be superimposed onto the lives of Hong Kong Christians, and are somehow universal ways of knowing: "Any institution in the business of gathering, producing and disseminating knowledge is called upon to understand how it has constituted itself as well as the materials and methodologies it works with" (Gopal 873-99). This idea of a Eurocentric theological education comes from the fact that theology professors, including myself, are often educated in Europe or North America, and our theologies are largely shaped by British or German understandings of what church communities are – or should be. But "[w]e who journey in theological education—as teacher, as student, as administrator, or as committed graduate—often fail to realize that we always and only work in the fragments" (Jennings 16). I agree with Parker's assessment:

> During the colonial period great efforts were made by the colonizers to eradicate indigenous beliefs, languages and cultures, in order to control and colonize the minds of the people. Consequentially, Western beliefs, practices, theories, and philosophies and theologies dominated the world practically and intellectually. Through a process of

> normalization, trust was granted—and internalized—to the hegemonic knowledge of the West that formulated a grand narrative in which the epistemologies of the colonized were marginalized and mocked. (intro)

I find this problem to be a continuing issue in Hong Kong's theological education, and I suggest that experiential learning, such as lived theology, can contribute to theological education by focusing on empirical accounts of actual bodily practices instead of relying on idealized versions of them. American sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman describes lived theology well:

> How religion happens in everyday life has come to be called "lived religion." To study religion this way is to expand our lens beyond the official texts and doctrines so as to see how ideas about the sacred emerge in unofficial places. It is to include the practices of ordinary people, not just religious leaders. [...] It is to focus on what people are doing, as well as what they are saying. (5)

I hope to see the theology of average Hong Kong Christians in Hong Kong theological education through practical theology and qualitative research methods, reflecting on how their indigenous, pragmatic actions may contribute to theological studies locally and beyond. Universities and seminaries are currently invested in practical theology and qualitative research, but these research works are largely read by academics. It is important that churches and congregants also be invested in these local congregational research works, increasing both self-understanding and collective understanding of faith in Hong Kong.

Through education, we are taught where we belong or do not belong, and by excluding local Hong Kong Chinese experiences in understanding what Hong Kong theological education is, those who are being taught theology are also taught they do not belong, or even that their faith is inferior or less worthy. For example, in his sermon, OMF director Patrick Fung referred to sacrificial servanthood as a paradigm of Christianity by citing several straight white Oxbridge men who traveled to China as missionaries from Britain during its golden colonial days. While I hope this was not his intention, these examples were incredibly alienating, as it could be interpreted that those who do not fit the mold cannot be real Christians. It is problematic for Hong Kong Christians to adopt "the West's self-belief in its superiority, given supposedly scientific legitimacy in the Enlightenment, was in part bolstered by the supposed inferiority of the people and cultures it encountered in the East" (Andrews 98). Theological education is meant to be about formation, and American theologian Willie James Jennings explains that, currently, the distorted formation of theological

education is due to the assumption that those educated are self-sufficient white men, and theological education is meant to promulgate white hegemony and homogeneity. But "[t]heological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people" (Jennings 9-10). If students are alienated by their understanding of what theological education is – as they are othered – then theological education needs to be rethought in a way that is helpful. This could be done by raising critical questions regarding the ways in which theological education has treated certain groups of people or has dealt with issues of power and inequality (Schweitzer). Hong Kong Christians understand theology as a Western theology that can be universally applied, but this "[c]olonialist education assimilation turned education into an imperialist endeavor, forcing a way of life that would reduce ways of life" (Jennings 174). Critical thinking and traditional reflection can both contribute to Hong Kong Christians' ways of knowing God, and that can be captured and analyzed in a greater value of local, lived theology.

Concluding Thoughts

What is theological education? Does it have to happen in divinity schools or seminaries? Can Sunday school be a form of studying theology? What about in university settings? Or on YouTube or Facebook? Often theological education is seen as something over and beyond the grasp of mere lay Christians, that average Christians should just be pietistic and not be involved in intellectual pursuits on theological beliefs. I am not suggesting that my argument is entirely novel. I am aware that the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA), where several Hong Kong seminaries are members of, adopted the Critical Asian Principle (CAP) in 1972 to promote an Asian orientation in theological education and to identify what is distinctly Asian as a critical principle of judgment in theological education. I find that a renewed reminder is needed. My hope is that this article will spark much-needed reflections on why Hong Kong Christians are teaching and learning theological education the way we do right now and how we can reflect on our current practices in a way that makes them meaningful for our congregants' experiences. If, as Hong Kong philosopher Chan-fai Cheung proposes, the humanities are important in university education in learning to be human, then theological studies are important in university, divinity school, and seminary settings as humans learn who they are in relation to God and with each other, which necessarily involves context and time-specific matters (xxix-xxxii). Self-involvement is the aim of theology, and lifting up the praxis of Hong Kong Christians will get to the crux of Hong Kong theology better than studying Thomas Aquinas or Dietrich Bonhoeffer

and will be more helpful for Hong Kong Christians to know themselves in relation to who God is.

Additionally, my aim is not to flatten Christian experiences in Hong Kong. I am aware of the diverse experiences of Hong Kong Christians, given their different denominations, ethnicity, languages, and more. Diversity in Hong Kong churches and theological institutions can be found in Tobias Brandner's Christians in the City of Hong Kong, which fully portrays the diversity of Hong Kong Christianities. That is not the aim of this paper—I aim to argue that rethinking theological education is necessary.

As British philosopher Onora O'Neill concludes: "The value of humanities research is neither negligible or ineffable. Research of all sorts can change individuals and societies" (v-vii). The study of lived theology outside of the Western world proposes new possibilities of knowing and constructing the world to go beyond Western rationality, reclaiming and recentering indigenous epistemologies. Interpreting and analyzing theological principles in an ahistorical manner is not enough. Christian communities must critically reflect on how they act, identify the relationships between revelations from God, and reflect on praxis (Luk).

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